

Intervention and Exploitation: US and UK Government International Actions Since 1945

Guatemala

Summary

1931: US companies dominate.
1944: New president starts reforms.
1951: Arbenz continues reforms.
1954: US intervenes. Arbenz overthrown. US backs repressive Armas. Britain aids US at UN.
1963: Peralta becomes president following assassination of Armas.
1966: Civilian rule restored.
1970: Military-backed president.
1970s: CIA supports killings.
1976: Earthquake kills thousands.
1977: US cuts off overt military aid, but support continues via CIA.
1980s: US supported dictators.
1990: US cuts off military aid, but support via the CIA continues.
1994: Peace talks begin.
1995: Campaign of Jennifer Harbury forces US policy change.
1996: Peace agreement signed.
2001: No reparations by US.
2003: "Free-trade" with US.

1931:

Under dictator Jorge Ubico (1931-1944), American-owned United Fruit Company (UFC) gained control of forty-two percent of Guatemala's land, and was exempted from taxes and import duties. The three main enterprises in Guatemala -- United Fruit Company, International Railways of Central America, and Empress Electrica -- were American-owned (and controlled by United Fruit Company). Seventy-seven percent of all exports went to the US and sixty-five percent of imports came from the US. [2]

1941:

Guatemala declares war on the Axis powers. [1]

1944:

Juan Jose Arevalo becomes president following the overthrow of Ubico and introduces social-democratic reforms, including setting up a social security system and redistributing land to landless peasants. [1]

While in power from 1945 to 1951, Arevalo established the nation's social security and health systems and a government bureau to look after Mayan concerns. Arévalo's liberal regime experienced many coup attempts by conservative military forces, but the attempts were not successful. [2]

1951:

Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzman becomes president, continuing Arevalo's reforms. [1]

At the time, 2% of landowners owned 70% of the arable land and farm laborers were kept in debt slavery by these landowners. Arbenz continued to implement the liberal policies of Arevalo, and instituted an agrarian reform law to break up the large estates and foster individually owned small farms. The land reform program involved redistribution of 160,000 acres of uncultivated land owned by United Fruit Company. United Fruit was compensated for its land. [2]

1954:

Important people in the ruling circles of the US, involved with United Fruit Company, used their influence to convince the US government to step in. [2]

In 1954, Eisenhower and Dulles decided that Arbenz finally had to go, and the US State Department labeled Guatemala "communist". On this pretext, US aid and equipment were provided to the Guatemalan Army. The US also sent a CIA army and CIA planes. They bombed a military base and a government radio station, and overthrew Arbenz Guzmán, who fled to Cuba. [2] [3]

Aided by the US, Colonel Castillo Armas became the new president. The US Ambassador furnished Armas with lists of radical opponents to be eliminated, and the bloodletting promptly began. Under Armas, thousands were arrested and many were tortured and killed. United Fruit got all its land back. As an extra present, the Banana Worker's Union was banned. Armas disenfranchised one-third of the voters by barring illiterates from voting. He outlawed all political parties, labor confederations, and peasant organizations. He closed down opposition newspapers and burned "subversive" books. The "Springtime" had ended. [2]

Britain aids US position at UN. [7]

During the 1960s and 70s, American military aid and training made Guatemala's army the strongest and most sophisticated in Central America. Between 1966 - 68, during the Johnson presidency, the Green Berets were sent to Guatemala to transform its Army into a modern counter-insurgency force and to conduct a Vietnam -style war there. [2]

1963:

Colonel Enrique Peralta becomes president following the assassination of Castillo. [1]

1966:

Civilian rule restored; Cesar Mendez elected president. [1]

1970:

Military-backed Carlos Arena elected president. [1]

1970s:

Military rulers embark on a programme to eliminate left-wingers, resulting in at least 50,000 deaths. [1]

Since the 1960s, the CIA has had links with a Guatemalan Army unit -- the G-2 -- that maintains a network of torture centers and body dumps throughout Guatemala and has killed thousands of Guatemalan civilians. Operating out of the US Embassy, CIA undercover agents, secretly working with the G-2 -- a group of 2,000 elite Guatemalan Army Intelligence officers -- have trained, advised, armed, and equipped these officers to torture, assassinate and disappear thousands of Guatemalan dissidents. Some G-2 bases have their own crematoriums where the tortured and murdered are disposed of. [2]

In the 1970s, international publicity revealed the pattern of torture and killing, and public reports exposed the Guatemalan Army as the most repressive in Latin America. This series of events resulted in a change in human rights sentiment in the US. [2]

1976:

27,000 people are killed and more than a million rendered homeless by earthquake. [1]

1977:

US President Jimmy Carter cut off overt military aid. However, money and arms still got to there -- through the CIA. When President Lucas Garcia began his fearsome regime in 1978, and set out to eliminate all the new popular leaders by either murdering or coopting them, and when death squads roamed the land and murdered at will, the CIA was there to help. [2]

In addition to US and CIA support, Argentina, and Chile provided expertise and aid to Guatemala's military. And, Israel has played a very important role in Guatemala since 1977, supplying weapons, building munitions factories, and training soldiers. [2]

1980s:

..were marked by barbaric repression and the massacre of the indigenous population. A succession of elected dictators, supported by the US, left suffering in their wake. Because of the notoriety that again developed from reports of human rights violations by the Guatemalan Army, President Reagan changed the US policy of overt aid to the Guatemalan Army to a two-track policy. While government spokespersons made public pronouncements in support of human rights and the return to civilian rule, the Reagan Administration signaled to the Guatemalan Army its approval for winning the war, and it lobbied Congress for more aid. The CIA continued to work with Guatemala's security forces. [2] [4]

1981:

Around 11,000 people are killed by death squads and soldiers in response to growing anti-government guerrilla activity. [1]

1982:

General Efraim Rios Montt, a graduate of the School of the Americas (SOA), at Fort Benning, Georgia, came to power in a 1982 coup. Praised as a "born-again" Christian reformer, in truth he was one of the most savage of Guatemalan dictators. His "Beans and Rifles" program was designed to keep guerrillas out of Indian villages -- beans for those who cooperated, rifles for those who didn't. He declared a "state of siege", and on television, he stated that he had "declared a state of siege so that we could kill legally". He banned public meetings, suspended the constitution, replaced elected officials, and censored the press. He also instituted Civil Defense Patrols (PACs) to control the population. [2] During the 17 months of Rios Montt's "Christian" campaign, 400 villages were destroyed, 10 - 20,000 Indians were killed, and over 100,000 fled to Mexico. [2]

1983:

Early in 1983, President Reagan resumed military shipments to Guatemala, claiming that Montt's program against the guerrilla insurgency was working. He said that Montt was given a "bum rap" on human rights. [2]

August - Montt ousted in coup led by General Mejia Victores, who declares an amnesty for guerrillas. [1]

1985:

December - Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo, a civilian who campaigned as a populist reformer, is elected president. But, the Army continue to have the power. Cerezo disbands the secret police (DIT), but assassinations of students, peasants, and human rights activists continued through the Army's G-2, with CIA assistance. [2]

1989:

Attempt to overthrow Cerezo fails; civil war toll since 1980 reaches 100,000 dead and 40,000 missing. [1]

The Bush administration, under the guise of humanitarian aid, sent National Guard units to Guatemala to provide medical services. They served in areas where the guerrilla movement was the strongest. According to villagers, a visit from the National Guard units sometimes bore more of a resemblance to police interrogations than to medical examinations. As villagers were getting "humanitarian" help, they were questioned about the type of organizations they had, who their leaders were, and what type of people visited their community. [2]

1990:

Michael DeVine, an American businessman living in Guatemala, apparently stumbled upon the Guatemalan Army's drug-trafficking activities. He was kidnapped and murdered. In response, President George Bush cut off military aid to Guatemala and publicly criticized the Army. But, Reagan's two-track policy was still in effect, so Bush continued to send CIA funds to the military to allow them to continue their war, and strengthened the ties between the CIA and the Guatemalan Army. [2]

1991:

Jorge Serrano Elias elected president. Diplomatic relations restored with Belize, from whom Guatemala had long-standing territorial claims. [1]

1993:

Serrano forced to resign after his attempt to impose an authoritarian regime ignites a wave of protests; Ramiro de Leon Carpio elected president by the legislature. [1]

1994:

Peace talks between the government and rebels of the Guatemalan Revolutionary National Unity begin; right-wing parties win a majority in legislative elections. [1]

A United Nations human rights verification mission was established to monitor human rights in Guatemala. It is called MINUGUA. MINUGUA highlighted numerous cases of torture, extrajudicial killings, and disappearances by security forces. It showed that human rights violations occur daily. The victims are mostly students, teachers, trade unionists, human rights workers, and peasant activists. MINUGUA reports documented that death squads are run by the Army and National Police, who also traffic in narcotics, and are involved in car theft and kidnappings. [2]

1995:

US policy toward Guatemala was driven by the unprecedented public attention to the plight of US citizen Jennifer Harbury, the wife of disappeared guerrilla leader Efraim Bamaca. In 1992, Bamaca was captured and murdered. His wife, American attorney Jennifer Harbury, waged an impassioned campaign to find her husband and bring his killers to justice. Her hunger strikes first in Guatemala City and then in front of the White House, touched a chord among Americans. Representative Robert Toricelli of the House Intelligence Committee revealed that both Michael DeVine and Efraim Bamaca had been executed on the orders of Colonel Julio Roberto Alpirez, who had been on the CIA payroll for years, and had been trained at the School of the Americas. [2]

Harbury's struggle against the lies, intimidation, and cover-up mounted by the Guatemalan authorities brought to US public attention a reality all too familiar to Guatemalans. In addition, her pressure for answers from the US government prompted the unraveling of a series of revelations about the CIA's secret assistance to abusive military institutions and officers in Guatemala. The scandal revealed a secret policy that for many years had made all but irrelevant Washington's public postures on human rights in Guatemala. In the cascade of revelations, it became clear the CIA had secretly provided millions of dollars in assistance to Guatemala's G-2 unit, even after the US government cut-off of overt military aid and sales in 1990. [2]

In March 1995, the Clinton Administration, as a result of Jennifer Harbury's hunger strike in front of the White House, suspended military training for Guatemalan Army officers. Shortly thereafter, Clinton ordered most of the CIA's assistance to the Guatemalan military suspended, except for anti-narcotics funding. The Intelligence Oversight Board (it had never before been convened) was convened at the end of 1995, but its report was a whitewash, concluding that "No evidence has been found that any employee of the CIA in any way directed, participated in or condoned the murder of Michael DeVine." Perhaps, Alpirez was not considered an "employee" even though he was on the CIA payroll. It seems certain that there will be a similar finding in the Bamaca execution as well. [2]

Several millions of dollars in military aid cut off in 1990 by the Bush administration, was channeled by Clinton into a peace fund to support the work of the MINUGUA human rights verification mission. [2]

1996:

Alvaro Arzu elected president, conducts purge of senior military officers and signs peace agreement with rebels, ending 36 years of civil war. [1]

1998 :

Bishop Juan Gerardi, a human rights campaigner, murdered. [1]

1999:

UN-backed commission says security forces were behind 93% of all human rights atrocities committed during the civil war, which claimed 200,000 lives, and that senior officials had overseen 626 massacres in Maya villages. [1]

2000:

Alfonso Portillo sworn in as president after winning elections in 1999. [1]

Human rights violations increase dramatically, reaching their highest levels since the 1996 Accords. [5]

2001:

In a meeting with U.S.-based solidarity groups, U.S. Ambassador Prudence Bushnell rejected the suggestion that the U.S. government assist in providing reparations payments to Guatemalan war victims. [5]

December - President Portillo pays \$1.8 million in compensation to the families of 226 men, women and children killed by soldiers and paramilitaries in the northern village of Las Dos Erres in 1982. [1]

2002:

September - Guatemala and Belize agree on draft settlement to their long-standing border dispute at talks brokered by Organization of American States (OAS). Both nations will hold referendums on draft settlement. [1]

2003:

November - Presidential elections go to second round. Former military leader Efraín Ríos Montt trails in third place, accepts defeat.

December - Conservative businessman Oscar Berger - a former mayor of Guatemala City - wins presidential election in second round.

Guatemala - along with Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras - agrees on free-trade agreement with US. [1]

2004:

May - Former military leader Efraín Ríos Montt placed under house arrest. [1] [6]

May/June - Major cuts to the army; bases are closed and 10,000 soldiers are retired. [1]

July - \$3.5 million in damages paid to victims of civil war. Move follows state's formal admissions of guilt in several well-known human rights crimes. [1]